

What is Marxism

We are reproducing a slightly edited version of *What is Marxism?* by Rob Sewell and Alan Woods, last published in 1983 to celebrate the centenary of the death of Karl Marx. The three articles on the fundamental aspects of Marxism, Marxist Economics, Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism were originally published separately in the 1970s. These articles are a good, brief introduction to the basic methods of Marxism and can serve as a first approach to the ideas developed by Marx and Engels.

1983 Introduction

Marxism, or Scientific Socialism, is the name given to the body of ideas first worked out by Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). In their totality, these ideas provide a fully worked-out theoretical basis for the struggle of the working class to attain a higher form of human society--socialism.

While the conceptions of Marxism have been subsequently developed and enriched by the historical experience of the working class itself, the fundamental ideas remain unshaken, providing a firm foundation for the Labour Movement today. Neither before, nor since the lifetime of Marx and Engels have any superior, more truthful or scientific theories been advanced to explain the movement of society and the role of the working class in that movement. A knowledge of Marxism therefore equips the proletariat theoretically for the great historic task of the Socialist transformation of Society.

It is this fact which explains the constant and bitter attacks on all

aspects of Marxism which have been delivered by every conceivable defender of the existing social order--from the Tory to the Fabian, from the Jesuit priest to the University professor. From the very spleen of these attacks, to the fact that they have to be kept up continuously despite the fact that every single one of the pundits in turn claims to have "finally disposed" of Marxism, the thinking member of the Labour Movement can deduce two facts. First, that the defenders of capitalism recognise in Marxism the most dangerous challenge to their system, and thereby also instantly confess the truth in it, despite all their attempts to "disprove" it. Second, that far from disappearing under the heap of abuse, quack "exposures", and flagrant distortions, the theories of Marx and Engels are steadily gaining ground, particularly within the active layers of the Labour Movement, as increasing numbers of workers, under the impact of the crisis of capitalism, strive to discover the real meaning of the forces which shape their lives, in order to be able to consciously influence and determine their own destiny.

The theories of Marxism provide the thinking worker with such an understanding--a thread which is capable of leading him through the confused labyrinth of events, of the complex processes of society, of economics, of the struggle of classes, of politics. Armed with this sword the worker can cut the Gordian knot which binds him to the mightiest obstacle in the way of the advancement of himself and his class--ignorance.

It is to keep this knot firmly in place that the hired representatives of the ruling class struggle with might and main to discredit Marxism in the eyes of the working class. It is the duty of every serious worker of the Labour Movement to conquer for himself or herself the theories of Marx and Engels, as an essential prerequisite for the conquest of society by the working people.

Yet there are obstacles in the path of the worker's struggle for theory and understanding far more intractable than the scribblings of priests and professors. A man or woman who is obliged to toil long hours in industry, who has not had the benefit of a decent

education and consequently lacks the habit of reading, finds great difficulty in absorbing some of the more complex ideas, especially at the outset. Yet it was for workers that Marx and Engels wrote, and not for “clever” students and middle class people. “Every beginning is difficult” no matter what science we are talking about. Marxism is a science and therefore makes heavy demands upon the beginner. But every worker who is active in the trade unions or Labour Party knows that nothing is worthwhile if attained without a degree of struggle and sacrifice. It is the activists in the Labour Movement at whom the present pamphlet is aimed. To the active worker who is prepared to persevere, one promise can be made: once the initial effort is made to come to grips with unfamiliar and new ideas, the theories of Marxism will be found to be basically straight-forward and simple. Moreover--and this should be emphasised--the worker who acquires by patient effort an understanding of Marxism will turn out to be a better theoretician than most students, just because he can grasp the ideas not merely in the abstract, but

concretely, as applied to his own life and work.

All exploiting classes attempt to morally justify their class rule by portraying them, as the highest, most natural form of social development, deliberately concealing the system of exploitation by disguising and distorting the truth. The present day capitalist class, through their professional hirelings and hangers on, have elaborately evolved a whole new philosophy and morality to justify their ruling position in society.

The working class, on the contrary, has no material interest in distorting the truth, and sets itself the task of laying bare the realities of capitalism in order to consciously prepare for its emancipation. Far from seeking a special position for itself, the working class has the aim of abolishing capitalism and with it all class distinctions and privileges. To do so it must reject the outlook of the capitalists, and seek for itself a new Marxist method of understanding.

The Marxist method provides a richer, fuller, more comprehensive view of

society and life in general, and clears away the veil of mysticism in understanding human and social development. Marxist philosophy explains that the driving force of history is neither “Great Men” nor the supernatural, but stems from the development of the productive forces (industry, science, technique, etc.) themselves. It is economics, in the last analysis, that determines the conditions of life, the habits and consciousness of human beings.

Each new re-organisation of society--be it slavery, feudalism or capitalism--has ushered in an enormous development of the productive forces which in turn gave men and women greater powers over nature. As soon as a social system proves unable to develop these forces of production, then that society enters an epoch of revolution. However, in the case of the change from capitalism to socialism, the process is not automatic but requires the conscious intervention of the working class to carry through this task of history. Failure to do so in the long run would pave the way for the advent of reaction and eventual world war.

Capitalism has once again entered a new world economic crisis resulting in mass unemployment on the lines of the 1930s. The quack theories of capitalist economists have proved utterly incapable of preventing recessions, which has driven the ruling class to ditch Keynesianism and re-adopt the old measures of “sound finance”, of monetarism. Rather than rescue the situation this latter programme has served to deepen and prolong the crisis!

Only Marxism has been able to expose the contradictions of Capitalism which result periodically in depression and slump. Capitalism has now completely exhausted its historical role in developing the productive basis of society. Hemmed in by the nation state and private ownership, the productive forces are systematically destroyed in the face of the mass overproduction of commodities and capital.

As Marx himself explained: “In these crises there breaks out an epidemic that in all earlier epochs, would have seemed an absurdity--the epidemic of overproduction.

“Society suddenly finds itself put back into a state of monetary barbarism; it appears as if a famine, a universal war of destruction has cut off the supply of every means of subsistence; industry and commerce seem to be destroyed. And why? Because there is too much civilisation, too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce. The productive forces at the disposal of society no longer tend to further the development of the conditions of Bourgeois property; on the contrary they have become too powerful for these conditions by which they are fettered, and so as soon as they overcome these fetters, they bring disorder into the whole of Bourgeois society, endanger the existence of Bourgeois property.”

The present pamphlet brings together for the first time the three supplements of the South Wales Bulletin of Marxist Studies (first published in the 1970s) as a small contribution to the increasing thirst for the ideas of Marxism. It is also fitting that the issue of the pamphlet coincides with the centenary of Karl Marx's death, on 14 March 1883, the co-

founder with Engels, of scientific socialism.

This pamphlet however is not intended to provide a complete exposition of Marxism, but to assist the worker-student in his approach to the subject by giving a rough outline of some basic ideas, plus a selected reading list with which he may continue his studies. Marx and Engels themselves wrote many brief pamphlets and shorter explanatory works aimed at popularising their theories among the working class, and these provide the basis of the suggested reading list.

The study of Marxism falls under three main headings, corresponding broadly to philosophy, social history and economics, or, to give them their correct names, Dialectical Materialism, Historical Materialism and the Labour Theory of Value. These are the famous “three component parts of Marxism” of which Lenin wrote.

Rob Sewell and Alan Woods

18 February, 1983

THE METHOD OF MARXISM AN INTRODUCTION TO DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM

What is a philosophy?

At each stage in human history, men and women have worked out some sort of picture of the world and their place in it. They develop a Philosophy. The pieces they use to make up this picture have been obtained by observing nature and through generalising their day to day experiences.

Some people believe they have no need of such a philosophy or world outlook. Yet in practise everyone has a philosophy, even if it is not consciously worked out. People who live by rule of thumb or “common sense” and think they are doing without theory, in practice think in the traditional way. Marx once said that the dominant ideas of society are those of the ruling class. To maintain and justify its rule, the capitalist class makes use of every available means to distort the consciousness of the worker. The school, church, TV, and press are used to foster the ideology of the ruling class and

indoctrinate the worker into accepting their system as the most natural permanent form of society. In the absence of a conscious socialist philosophy, they accept unconsciously the capitalist one.

At each point in class society, the rising revolutionary class, aiming to change society, have to fight for a new world outlook and have to attack the old philosophy, which, being based on the old order, justified and defended it.

Idealism and materialism

Throughout the history of philosophy we find two camps, the Idealist and the Materialist. The common idea of “Idealism” (i.e. honesty, uprightness in the pursuit of ideals) and “Materialism” (i.e. base, greedy, money-grabbing egoism) has nothing to do with philosophical idealism and philosophical materialism.

Many great thinkers of the past were Idealists, notably Plato and Hegel. This school of thought looks upon nature and history as a reflection of ideas or spirit. The theory that men and women and every material thing was created by a divine Spirit, is a basic concept of idealism. This outlook is expressed in a number of ways, yet its basis is that ideas govern the development of the material world. History is explained as a history of thought. People's actions are seen as resulting from abstract thoughts, and not from their material needs. Hegel went one step further, being a consistent idealist, and turned thoughts into an independent “Idea” existing outside of the brain and independent of the material world. The

latter was merely a reflection of this Idea. Religion is part and parcel of philosophical idealism.

The Materialist thinkers on the other hand, have maintained that the material world is real and that nature or matter is primary. The mind or ideas are a product of the brain. The brain, and therefore ideas, arose at a certain stage in the development of living matter. The basic corner-stones of Materialism are as follows:

(a) The material world, known to us by our senses and explored by science, is real. The development of the world is due to its own natural laws, without any recourse to the supernatural.

(b) There is only one world, the material one. Thought is a product of matter (the brain) without which there can be no separate ideas. Therefore minds or ideas cannot exist in isolation apart from matter. General ideas are only reflections of the material world. “To me,” wrote Marx, “the idea is nothing else than the material world reflected in the human mind, and translated into

forms of thought.” And further, “Social being determines consciousness”.

The Idealists conceive of consciousness, of thought, as something external, and opposed to matter, to nature. This opposition is something entirely false and artificial. There is a close correlation between the laws of thought and the laws of nature, because the former follow and reflect the latter. Thought cannot derive its categories from itself, but only from the external world. Even the most seemingly abstract thoughts are in fact derived from the observation of the material world.

Even an apparently abstract science like pure mathematics has, in the last analysis, been derived from material reality, and is not spun from the brain. The school-child secretly counts his material fingers under a material desk before solving an abstract arithmetical problem. In so doing, he is re-creating the origins of mathematics itself. We base ourselves upon the decimal system because we have ten fingers. The Roman numerals were originally based on the representation of fingers.

According to Lenin, “this is materialism: matter acting on our sense organs produces sensation. Sensations depend upon the brain, nerves, retina, etc., i.e., matter is primary. Sensation, thought, consciousness are the supreme product of matter”.

People are a part of nature, who develop their ideas in interaction with the rest of the world. Mental processes are real enough, but they are not something absolute, outside nature. They should be studied in their material and social circumstances in which they arise. “The phantoms formed in the human brain,” stated Marx, “are ... necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process.” Later he concluded, “morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development, but men, developing their material production and their material intercourses, alter along with this their real existence their thinking and the product of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.”

The origins of materialism

“The original home of all modern materialism,” wrote Engels, “from the seventeenth century onwards, is England.” At this time, the old feudal aristocracy and monarchy were being challenged by the newly emerged middle classes. The bastion of feudalism was the Roman Catholic church, which provided the divine justification for the monarchy and feudal institutions. This, therefore, had to be undermined before feudalism could be overthrown. The rising bourgeoisie challenged the old ideas and divine concepts that the old order was based upon.

“Parallel with the rise of the middle classes went on the great revival of science; astronomy, mechanics, physics, anatomy, physiology, were again cultivated. And the bourgeoisie for the development of its industrial production, required a science which ascertained the physical properties of natural objects and the modes of action of the forces of Nature. Now up to then science had but been the humble handmaid of the church, had not been allowed to overstep the limits set by

faith, and for that reason had been no science at all. [In the 17th century, Galileo demonstrated the truth of Copernicus' theory that the earth and planets revolved around the Sun. The professors of the day ridiculed these ideas and used the power of the Index and the Inquisition against Galileo to force him to recant his views. RS] (Science rebelled against the church; the bourgeoisie could not do without science, and therefore, had to join in the rebellion.)” (F. Engels.)

It was at this time that Francis Bacon (1561-1626) developed his revolutionary ideas of materialism. According to him the senses were infallible and the source of all knowledge. All science was based upon experience, and consisted in subjecting the data to a rational method of investigation; induction, analysis, comparison, observation and experiment. It was, however, left to Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) to continue and develop Bacon's materialism into a system. He realised that ideas and concepts were only a reflection of the material world, and that “it is impossible to separate thought from matter that thinks”. Later, the English

thinker John Locke (1632-1704) provided proof of this materialism.

The materialist school of philosophy passed from England to France, to be taken up and developed further by Rene Descartes (1596-1650) and his followers. These French materialists did not limit themselves to criticisms of religion, but extended them to all institutions and ideas. They challenged these things in the name of Reason, and gave ammunition to the developing bourgeoisie in their struggle with the monarchy. The birth of the great French Bourgeois Revolution of 1789-93 took as its creed materialist philosophy. Unlike the English Revolution in the mid-17th century, its French counter-part completely destroyed the old feudal order. As Engels later pointed out: "We know today that this kingdom of reason was nothing more than the idealised kingdom of the bourgeoisie."

The defect, however, of this materialism from Bacon onwards was its rigid, mechanical interpretation of Nature. Not accidentally, the English school of materialist philosophy flourished in the 18th century, when the discoveries of

Isaac Newton made “mechanics” the most advanced and important science. In the words of Engels: “The specific limitation of this materialism lay in its inability to comprehend the universe as a process, as matter undergoing uninterrupted historical development.”

The French Revolution had a profound effect upon the civilised world, similar to the Russian Revolution of 1917. It revolutionised thinking in every field, politics, philosophy, science and art. The ferment of ideas emerging from this bourgeois democratic revolution ushered in advances in natural science, geology, botany, chemistry as well as political economy.

It was in this period that a criticism was made of the mechanical approach of the materialists. A German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), made the first breakthrough in the old mechanistic ways with his discovery that the Earth and the solar system had come into being, and had not existed eternally. The same also applies to geography, geology, plants and animals.

This revolutionary idea of Kant was comprehensively developed by another brilliant German thinker, George Hegel (1770-1831). Hegel was a philosophical idealist, believing that the world could be explained as a manifestation or reflection of a “Universal Mind” or “Idea”, i.e., some form of God.

Hegel looked upon the world not as an active participant in society and human history, but as a philosopher, contemplating events from afar. He set himself up as a measuring rod of the world, interpreting history according to his prejudices as the history of thought, the world as the world of ideas, an Ideal World. Thus for Hegel, problems and contradictions were posed not in real terms but in terms of thought, and could therefore find their solution only in terms of thought. Instead of contradictions in society being solved by the actions of men and women, by the class struggle, they instead find their solution in the philosopher's head, in the Absolute Idea!

Nevertheless, Hegel recognised the errors and shortcomings of the old mechanistic outlook. He also pointed

out the inadequacies of formal logic and set about the creation of a new world outlook which could explain the contradictions of change and movement. (See below).

Although Hegel rediscovered and analysed the laws of motion and change, his idealism placed everything on its head. It was the struggle and criticism of the Young Hegelians, led by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), which tried to correct and place philosophy back on its feet. Yet even Feuerbach--“the under half of him was materialist, the upper half idealist” (Engels)--was not able to fully purge Hegelianism of its idealist outlook. This work was left to Marx and Engels, who were able to rescue the dialectical method from its mystical shell. Hegelian dialectics were fused with modern materialism to produce the revolutionary understanding of dialectical materialism.

What are dialectics?

We have seen that modern materialism is the concept that matter is primary and the mind or ideas are the product of the brain. But what is dialectical thinking or dialectics?

“Dialectics is nothing more than the science of the general laws of motion and development of nature, human society and thought.” (Engels, Anti-Dühring.)

The dialectical method of thinking already had a long existence before Marx and Engels developed it scientifically as a means of understanding the evolution of human society.

The ancient Greeks produced some great dialectical thinkers, including Plato, Zenon and Aristotle. As early as 500 B.C., Heraclitus advanced the idea that “everything is and is not, for everything is in flux, is constantly changing, constantly coming into being and passing away”. And further, “all things flow, all change. It is impossible to enter twice into one and the same stream”. This statement already

contains the fundamental conception of dialectics that everything in nature is in a constant state of change, and that this change unfolds through a series of contradictions.

“...the great basic thought that the world is not to be comprehended as a complex of ready made things, but as a complex of processes, in which things apparently stable, no less than their mental images in our heads, concepts go through an uninterrupted change of coming into being and passing away.” (Engels, Anti-Dühring,)

“For dialectical philosophy nothing is final, absolute, sacred. It reveals the transitory character of everything and in everything: nothing can endure before it except the uninterrupted process of becoming and of passing away, of endless ascendancy from the lower to the higher. And dialectical philosophy is nothing more than the mere reflection of this process in the thinking brain.” (Ibid.)

Dialectics and metaphysics

The Greek Philosophers brilliantly anticipated the later development of dialectics as of other sciences. But they could not themselves carry this anticipation to its logical conclusion owing to the low development of the means of production, and the lack of adequate information about the detailed workings of the universe. Their ideas gave a more-or-less correct general picture, but they were often more in the nature of inspired guesses than scientifically worked out theories. In order to carry human thought further, it was necessary to abandon these old methods to arrive at a general understanding of the universe, and concentrate on the smaller, more mundane tasks of collecting, sorting out and labelling a host of individual facts, of testing particular theories by experiment, of defining, etc.

This empirical, experimental, factual approach provided an enormous boost to human thought and science. Investigations into the workings of nature could now be carried out scientifically, analysing each particular

problem and testing each conclusion. But in the process, the old ability to deal with things in their connection, not separately, in their movement, not statically, in their life not in their death, was lost. The narrow, empirical mode of thought which consequently arose is termed the “Metaphysical” approach. It still dominates modern capitalist philosophy and science. In politics it is reflected in Harold Wilson's famous “pragmatism” (“if it works, it must be right”) and the constant appeals to “the Facts”.

But facts do not select themselves. They have to be chosen by individuals. The order and sequence in which they are arranged, and the conclusions drawn from them depend upon the preconceived notions of the individual. Thus such appeals for “the Facts”, which are supposed to convey the impression of scientific impartiality, are usually just a smokescreen to conceal the prejudices of the speaker.

Dialectics deals not only with facts, but with facts in their connection, i.e. processes, not only with isolated ideas,

but with laws, not only with the particular, but with the general.

Dialectical thinking stands in the same relationship to metaphysics as a motion picture to a still photograph. The one does not contradict the other, but compliments it. However, the truer, more complete approximation of reality is contained in the movie.

For everyday purposes and simple calculations, metaphysical thought, or “common sense”, suffices. But it has its limitations, and beyond these the application of “common sense” turns truth into its opposite. The fundamental shortcoming of this type of thinking is its inability to conceive of motion and development, and its rejection of all contradiction. However, movement and change imply contradiction.

“To the metaphysician things and their mental reflexes, ideas, are isolated, are to be considered one after the other and apart from each other, are objects of investigation, fixed, rigid, given once and for all. He thinks in absolutely irreconcilable antithesis ... For him a thing either exists or does not exist: a

thing cannot at the same time be itself and something else. Positive and negative absolutely exclude one another: cause and effect stand in rigid antithesis one to the other.” (Anti-Dühring, p. 34.)

For everyday purposes, for instance, it is possible to say with a degree of certainty whether an individual, plant or animal is alive or dead. But in reality the question is not so simple, as legal cases on abortion and the “rights of the foetus” indicate. At what point precisely does human life begin? At what point does it end? Death, also is not a simple event but a protracted process, as Heraclitus understood: “It is the same thing in us that is living and dead, asleep and awake, young and old; each changes place and becomes the other. We step and we do not step into the same stream: we are and are not.”

Trotsky, in his ABC of Materialist Dialectics characterised the dialectic as “a science of the forms of our thinking insofar as it is not limited to the daily problems of life but attempts to arrive at an understanding of more complicated and drawn-out processes.”

He compared dialectics and formal logic (metaphysics) to higher and lower mathematics. It was Aristotle who first developed the laws of formal logic, and his system of logic has been accepted ever since by the metaphysicians as the only possible method of scientific thinking.

“The Aristotelian logic of the simple syllogism is accepted as an axiom for a multitude of practical human activities and elementary generalisations. The postulate starts from the proposition that 'A' = 'A'. But in reality 'A' is not equal to 'A'. This is quite easy to prove if we observe these two letters under a lens--they are quite different from each other. But, one can object, the question is not of the size or form of the letters, since they are only symbols for equal quantities, for instance, a pound of sugar. The objection is beside the point--in reality a pound of sugar is never equal to a pound of sugar--a more delicate scale will always disclose a difference. Again one can object; but a pound of sugar is equal to itself. Neither is this true--all bodies change uninterruptedly in size, weight, colour, etc. They are never equal to themselves.

A sophist will respond that a pound of sugar is equal to itself 'at any given moment'. Aside from the extremely dubious practical value of the 'axiom' it does not withstand theoretical criticism, either. How should we really conceive the word 'moment' a purely mathematical abstraction, that is a zero of time? But everything exists in time: and existence itself is an uninterrupted process of transformation: time is subsequently a fundamental element of existence. Thus the axiom 'A' is equal to itself if it does not change, that is, if it does not exist.

“At first glance it could seem that these 'subtleties' are useless. In reality they are of decisive significance. The axiom 'A equals A' appears on the one hand to be the point of departure for all knowledge on the other hand the point of departure for all errors in our knowledge. To make use of the axiom 'A equals A' with impunity is possible only within certain limits. When quantitative changes in 'A' are negligible for the task at hand, then we can presume that 'A equals A'. This is, for example, the manner in which a buyer and a seller both consider a pound of sugar. We

consider the Sun's temperature likewise. Until recently we considered the buying power of the dollar in the same way. But quantitative changes beyond certain limits become qualitative. A pound of sugar subjected to the action of water or Kerosene cease to be a pound of sugar. A dollar in the embraces of a president ceases to be a dollar. To determine the right moment, the critical point where quantity changes to quality is one of the most important and difficult tasks in all spheres of knowledge, including sociology.” (Trotsky, ABC of Materialist Dialectic)

Hegel

The old dialectical method of reasoning, which had fallen into disuse from medieval times on, was revived in the early 19th century by the great German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, (1770-1831). Hegel, one of the most encyclopaedic minds of his time, subjected the forms of formal logic to a detailed criticism, and demonstrated their limitations and one-sidedness. Hegel produced the first really comprehensive analysis of the laws of dialectics, which served as a basis upon which Marx and Engels later developed their theory of dialectical materialism. Lenin characterised Hegelian dialectics as “the most comprehensive, the most right in content and the most profound doctrine of development”. In comparison with this, every other formulation was “one-sided and poor in content, and distorting and mutilating the real course of development (which often proceeds in leaps, catastrophes and revolutions) in nature and society”. (Lenin, Karl Marx.)

Hegel's View of things was that of “A development that seemingly repeats the

stages already passed, but repeats them differently, on a higher basis (negation of the negation), a development, so to speak, in spirals, not in a straight line; a development by leaps, catastrophes, revolutions; breaks in continuity; the transformations of quantity into quality; the inner impulses of development, imparted by the contradictions and conflict of the various forces and tendencies acting on a given body, or within a given phenomenon, or within a given society: the interdependence and the closest, indissoluble connection of all sides of every phenomenon (while history constantly discloses ever new sides), a connection that provides a uniform, a law-governed, universal process of motion, such are some of the features of dialectics as a richer (than the ordinary) doctrine of development.” (Ibid.)

“This new German philosophy culminated in the Hegelian system. In this system--and herein is its great merit--for the first time the whole world, natural, historical, intellectual, is represented as a process, i.e., as in constant motion, change, transformation, development; and the

attempt is made to trace out the internal connection that makes a continuous whole of all this movement and development. From this point of view the history of mankind no longer appeared as a wild whirl of senseless deeds of violence, as equally condemnable at the judgement-seat of mature philosophic reason, and which are best forgotten as quickly as possible, but as the process of evolution of man himself. It was now the task of the intellect to follow the gradual march of this process through all its devious ways and to trace out the inner laws running through all its apparently accidental phenomena.” (Engels, Anti-Dühring, p. 37.)

Hegel brilliantly posed the problem, but was prevented from solving it by his idealist preconceptions. It was, in Engels' words “a colossal miscarriage”. Despite its mystical side, Hegel's philosophy already explained the most important laws of dialectics: Quantity and quality, the interpenetration of opposites and negation of the negation.

Quantity and quality

“In spite of all gradualness, the transition from one form of motion to another always remains a leap, a decisive change”. (Engels, Anti-Dühring.)

The idea of change and evolution is now generally accepted, but the forms by which changes occur in nature and society have only been explained by Marxian dialectics. The common view of evolution as a peaceful, smooth and uninterrupted development is both one-sided and false. In politics it is the “gradualist” theory of social change--the basic theoretical plank of reformism.

Hegel developed the idea of a “nodal line of measure relations”--in which at a definite nodal point, the purely quantitative increase or decrease gives rise to a qualitative leap: for example in the case of heated water, where boiling point and freezing point are the nodes at which under normal pressure the leap into a new state of aggregation takes place, and where consequently quantity is transformed into quality.” (Engels, Anti-Dühring.)

Thus, in the example cited, the transformation of water from a liquid to vapour or solid ice do not occur by a gradual congealing or dissipation, but suddenly at a particular temperature (0°C, 100°C). The cumulative effect of numerous changes of the speed of the molecules eventually produces a change of state--quantity into quality.

Examples may be produced at will, from all the branches of science, from sociology and even from everyday life (e.g., the point at which the addition of salt changes the soup from something palatable to something undrinkable).

The Hegelian nodal line of measurement and the law of the transition of quantity into quality and vice-versa are of crucial importance not only to science (where, like other dialectical laws, they are used unconsciously by scientists who are not conscious dialecticians) but above all in an analysis of history, society and the movement of the working class.

The interpenetration of opposites

Just as “common sense” metaphysics seeks to eliminate contradiction from thought and revolution from evolution, it also tries to prove that all opposing ideas and forces are mutually exclusive. However, “we find upon closer examination that the two poles of an antithesis, positive and negative, e.g., are as inseparable as they are opposed, and that despite all their opposition they mutually interpenetrate. And we find, in like manner that cause and effect are conception to individual cases, but as soon as we consider the individual cases in their general connection with the universe as a whole, they run into each other, and they become confounded when we contemplate that universal action and interaction in which causes and effects are eternally changing places, so that what is effect here and now will be cause there and then and vice-versa”. (Engels, Anti-Dühring, p. 36.)

Dialectics is the science of inter-connections, in contrast to metaphysics which treats phenomena as separate and isolated. Dialectics seeks to uncover

the countless threads, transition, cause and effect which bind together the universe. The first task of a dialectical analysis is therefore to trace the “Necessary connection, the objective connection of all the aspects, forces, tendencies etc., of the given sphere of phenomena”. (Lenin, Philosophical Notebooks, p. 97.)

Dialectics approaches a given phenomenon from the point of view of its development, its own movement and life; how it arises and how it passes away; it also considers the internal contradictory tendencies and sides of this thing.

Motion is the mode of existence of the entire material universe. Energy and matter are inseparable. Furthermore, motion is not imparted “from without”, but the manifestation of the internal tensions that are inseparable not only from life, but from all forms of matter. Development and change takes place through internal contradictions. Thus dialectical analysis begins by laying bare by empirical investigation the inner contradictions which give rise to development and change.

From the dialectical standpoint all “polar opposites” are one-sided and inadequate, including the contradiction between “truth and error”. Marxism does not accept the existence of any “Eternal Truths”. All “truths” and “errors” are relative. What is true in one time and context becomes false in another: truth and error pass into each other.

Thus the progress of knowledge and science does not proceed from the mere negation of “incorrect theories”. All theories are relative, grasping one side of reality. Initially they are assumed to have universal validity and application. They are “true”. But at a certain point, deficiencies in the theory are noticed; they are not applicable to all circumstances, exceptions to the rule are found. These have to be explained, and at a certain point, new theories are developed which can account for the exceptions. But the new theories not only “negate” the old, but incorporate them in a new form.

We can exclude contradictions only by regarding objects as lifeless, at rest and individually juxtaposed, i.e.

metaphysically. But as soon as we consider things in their motion and change, in their life, their mutual interdependence and interaction, we come up against a series of contradictions.

Motion itself is a contradiction between being in the same place and somewhere else at the same time.

Life, equally, is a contradiction that “a being is at each moment itself and yet something else”. (Engels, Anti-Dühring, p. 167.)

Living structures constantly absorb substances from the environment, assimilate them and simultaneously other parts of the body decay, disintegrate and are expelled. Constant transformations occur also in the world of organic nature; e.g., a rock which disintegrated under the pressure of the elements. Everything is therefore constantly itself and something else at one and the same time. Thus, the desire to eliminate contradictions is the desire to eliminate reality.

Negation of the negation

Engels characterises this as “an extremely general and for this reason extremely far-reaching and important law of development of nature, history and thought; a law which ... holds good in the animal and plant kingdoms, in geology, in mathematics, in history and philosophy”. (Ibid., p. 193.)

This law, the workings of which were observed in nature long before it was written down, was first clearly elaborated by Hegel, who gives a whole series of concrete examples which are reiterated in Anti-Dühring. (Ibid., pp. 186-190.)

The law of the negation of the negation deals with the nature of development through a series of contradictions, which appear to annul, or negate a previous fact, theory, or form of existence, only to be later negated in its turn. Motion, change and development thus moves through an uninterrupted series of negations.

However, negation in the dialectical sense does not signify a mere annulment or obliteration whereby the

earlier stage is both overcome and preserved at the same time. Negation, in this sense, is both a positive and a negative act.

Hegel gives a simple example in his book, *The Phenomenology of the Mind*: “The bud disappears when the blossom breaks through, and we might say that the former is refuted by the latter; in the same way when the fruit comes the blossom may be explained to be a false form of the plant's existence, for the fruit appears as its true nature in place of the blossom. These stages are not merely differentiated, they supplement one another as being incomparable with one another. But the ceaseless activity of their own inherent nature makes them at the same time moments of an organic unity, where they do not merely contradict one another, but where one is as necessary as the other; and this equal necessity of all moments constitutes alone and thereby the life of the whole.”

In this process of endless self-annulment, the disappearance of certain forms and the emergence of others, a pattern frequently emerges

which seem to be a repetition of forms, events and theories already surpassed. Thus, it is a commonplace that “history repeats itself”. Reactionary bourgeois historians have thus tried to prove that history itself is merely a meaningless repetition, proceeding in a never-ending circle.

Dialectics, on the contrary, discerns within these seeming repetitions an actual ... development from lower to higher, an evolution in which the same forms may repeat themselves, but on a higher level, enriched by previous developments.

This can be seen most clearly from the process of development of human ideas. Hegel already showed how philosophy developed through a series of contradictions; one school of thought negating another, but simultaneously absorbing the older theories into its own system of thought.

Similarly with the development of science. The alchemists of the Middle Ages were motivated for the search for the “Philosophers' Stone” which could turn base metal into gold. Owing to the

low level of the productive forces and the lack of scientific technique, these early attempts at the “transmutation” of the elements was in reality a utopian fantasy. However, in the process of these vain attempts, the alchemists actually discovered a whole series of valuable facts about chemicals and experimental apparatus which later provided the basis of modern chemistry.

With the rise of capitalism, industry and technique, chemistry becomes a science which rejected the early “crazy” notions of the transmutation of the elements which was thus negated. However, all that was valuable and scientific in the discoveries of alchemy were preserved in the new chemistry, which maintained that the elements were “immutable” and could not be transformed one into another.

The 20th century has seen the revolutionising of science and technique with the discovery of nuclear physics, by means of which one element can actually be transformed into another. In fact, it would be theoretically possible to turn lead into gold, in modern times, but the process would be too expensive

to be justified economically. Thus this particular process seems to have turned full circle:

(a) transmutation of elements (b) non transmutation of elements (c) transmutation of elements

But the repetition is only apparent. In reality, modern science, which in one sense has returned to an idea of the ancient alchemists, includes within itself all the enormous discoveries of the 19th century and 18th century science. Thus, one generation stands on the shoulders of another. Ideas which have apparently been “disproved” or “negated” make their re-appearance, but on a higher level, enriched by the previous experiences and discoveries.

Dialectics bases itself upon determinism: the thought that nothing in nature, society or thought is accidental; that seeming “accidents” arise only as the result of a deeper necessity.

Superficial historians have written that the First World War was “caused” by the assassination of a Crown Prince at Sarajevo. To a Marxist this event was an

historical accident, in the sense that this chance event served as the pretext, or catalyst, for the world conflict which had already been made inevitable by the economic, political and military contradictions of imperialism. If the assassin had missed, or if the Crown Prince had never been born, the war would still have taken place, on some other diplomatic pretext. Necessity would have expressed itself through a different “accident”.

Everything which exists, exists of necessity. But, equally, everything which exists is doomed to perish, to be transformed into something else. Thus what is “necessary” in one time and place becomes “unnecessary” in another. Everything begets its opposite which is destined to overcome and negate it. This is true of individual living things as much as societies.

Every type of human society exists because it is necessary at the given time when it arises: “No special order ever disappears before all the productive forces for which there is room in it, have been developed: and new higher relations of production never appear

before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society. Therefore mankind always takes up only such problems as it can solve, since, looking at the matter more closely, we will always find that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions necessary for its solution already exist or at least are in the process of formation". (Marx, Critique of Political Economy.)

Slavery, in its day, represented an enormous leap forward over barbarism. It was a necessary stage in the development of productive forces, culture and human society. As Hegel put it: "It is not so much from slavery as through slavery that man becomes free".

Similarly capitalism was originally a necessary and progressive stage in human society. However, like slavery, primitive communism and feudalism (see section 2), capitalism has long since ceased to represent a necessary and progressive social system. It has foundered upon the deep contradictions inherent in it, and is doomed to be overcome by the rising forces of socialism, represented by the modern

proletariat. Private ownership of the means of production and the nation state, the basic features of capitalist society, which originally marked a great step forward, now serve only to fetter and undermine the productive forces and threaten all the gains made in centuries of human development.

Capitalism is now a thoroughly decrepit, degenerate social system, which must be overthrown and replaced by its opposite, Socialism, if human culture is to survive. Marxism is determinist, but not fatalist, because the working out of contradictions in society can only be achieved by men and women consciously striving for the transformation of society. This struggle of the classes is not pre-determined. Who succeeds depends on many factors, and a rising, progressive class has many advantages over the old, decrepit force of reaction. But ultimately, the result must depend upon which side has the stronger will, the greater organisation and the most skilful and resolute leadership.

The Marxist philosophy is therefore essentially a guide to action:

“Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is, however, to change it”. (Marx, Theses on Feuerbach.)

The victory of socialism will mark a new and qualitatively different stage of human history. To be more accurate it will mark the end of the prehistory of the human race, and start a real history.

However on the other hand, socialism marks a return to the earliest form of human society--tribal communism--but on a much higher level, which stands upon all the enormous gains of thousands of years of class society. The economy of superabundance, will be made possible by the application of socialist planning to the industry, science and technique established by capitalism, on a world scale. This in turn will once and for all make redundant the division of labour, the difference between mental and manual labour, between town and countryside, and the wasteful and barbaric class struggle and enable the human race at least to set its resources to the conquest of nature: to use Engels' famous phrase,

“Mankind's leap from the realms of necessity to the Realm of Freedom”.

INTRODUCTION TO HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

When one looks at history, it appears to be a mass of contradictions. Events are lost in a maze of revolutions, wars, periods of progress and of decline. Conflicts of classes and nations swirl around in the chaos of social development. How is it possible to understand and explain these events, when it appears that they have no rational basis?

From the beginning, human beings have sought to discover the laws which govern their existence. Theories ranging from supernatural guidance to the leadership of “Great Men” have attempted in one way or another, at one time or another to provide such an explanation. Some believe that as people act independently of each other, theories of human development are utterly worthless!

For almost 2,000 years the ideas of Genesis dominated the outlook of Western Europe. Those who attempted to undermine this concept were

branded as disciples of the Devil. It is only in very recent times that the “heretical” view of history, evolution, has been generally accepted although even then in a one-sided fashion.

For the capitalist class and their functionaries in the universities, schools and places of learning, history has to be taught in an academic and biased fashion with absolutely no relevance to the present day. They continue to peddle the myth that classes and private property have always existed in a bid to justify the “eternal” nature of capitalist exploitation and the economic anarchy inherent within it. Volumes and volumes have been written by leading academics and professors to disprove the writings of Marxism and above all its Materialist Conception of History.

Marxists attach enormous importance to the study of history; not for its own sake but so as to study the great lessons it contains. Without that understanding of the development of events, it is not possible to foresee future perspectives. Lenin, for example, prepared the Bolshevik Party for the October 1917

Revolution by a meticulous analysis of the experience of the Paris Commune and the events in Russia of 1905 and February 1917.

It is precisely in this sense that we study and learn from history. Marxism is the science of perspectives, using its method of Dialectical Materialism to unravel the complex processes of historical development.

Marxist philosophy examines things not as static entities but in their development, movement and life. Historical events are seen as processes. Evolution, however, is not simply the movement from the lower to the higher. Life and society develop in a contradictory way, through “spirals not in a straight line; a development by leaps, catastrophes, and revolutions; breaks in continuity; the transformation of quantity into quality; inner impulses towards development, imparted by the contradiction and conflict of the various forces and tendencies.” (Lenin.)

Engels expressed dialectics as being “the great basic thought that the world

is not to be comprehended as a complex of ready-made things, but as a complex of processes, in which the things apparently stable no less than their mind images in our heads, the concepts, go through an uninterrupted change of coming into being and passing away.” (*Anti-Duhring*).

This method is also materialist in outlook. Ideas, theories, party programmes, etc., do not fall from the sky but always reflect the material world and material interests. As Marx explained, “the mode of production of material life conditioned the social, political and intellectual life processes in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary their social being that determines their consciousness”.

Using this method, Marx was able to indicate:

“the way to an all-embracing and comprehensive study of the process of the rise, development, and decline of socio-economic systems. People make their own history but what determines the motives of people, of the mass of people—i.e., what is the sum total of all

these clashes in the mass of human societies? What are the objective conditions of production of material life that form the basis of all man's historical activity? What is the law of development of these conditions? To all these Marx drew attention and indicated the way to a scientific study of history as a single process which, with all its immense variety and contradictoriness, is governed by definite laws.”. (Lenin, *Karl Marx - A Brief Biographical Sketch With an Exposition of Marxism*)

Primitive communism

Early humans evolved some three million years ago out of a highly evolved species of ape. Slowly primitive “humans” moved away from the forests and into the plains; a transition which was accompanied by an improvement in the flexibility and dexterity of the hand. The posture of the body became more erect. Whereas other animals had different organs for defence (cutting digging, shovelling and coats for warmth), humans had none of these. To survive they had to develop their only resources which were their hands and brain. Through trial and error, humans learned various skills, which had to be handed down from one generation to another. Communication through speech became a vital necessity. As Engels explained, “mastery over nature began with the development of the hand, with labour, and widened man's horizon at every new advance”. Men and women were social animals forced to band together and co-operate in order to survive. Unlike the rest of the animal kingdom, they developed the ability to generalise and think abstractly. Labour begins with the making of tools. With

these tools, humans change their surrounding to meet their needs. “The animal merely uses its environment,” says Engels, “and brings about changes in it simply by his presence; Man by his changes makes it serve his ends, masters it. This is the final, essential distinction between Man and other animals, and once again it is labour that brings about this distinction.”

The economic forms were very simple. Humans, were very rare animals, and they roamed around in groups in search of food. This nomadic life was completely dominated with food gathering. Archaeologists call this period the old stone age. Henry Morgan, an early anthropologist, termed the period savagery. Then and for many thousands of years to come, private property did not exist. Everything that was made, collected, or produced was considered common property.

Between 10,000 and 12,000 years ago, a new higher period emerged known as the new stone age or Barbarism. Instead of roaming for food, advances were made in cultivating crops and domesticating animals. Men and women

became free to settle in a particular place and as a result new tools were fashioned to assist the new work, and a food producing economy was created. Stable tribes and communities arose at this time. Even today, for a variety of reasons, many tribes in Africa, the South Pacific and South America exist at this stage of Barbarism.

Yet with the birth of the permanent settlement, private dwellings did not come into being; on the contrary, the large ones that were built were for common use. In this period, no private family existed. The children belonged to the entire tribe.

In the stage of primitive communism (savagery and barbarism, each being a lower and higher stage respectively), no private property, classes, privileged elites, police or special coercive apparatus (the state) existed. The tribes themselves were divided into social units called clans or gentes (singular gens). These, in fact, were very large family groups, which traced their descent from the female line alone. This is what is termed a matriarchal society. How else could it be when it was

impossible to identify the real father of a child? It was forbidden for a man to cohabit with a woman from his own clan or gens, thus the tribes were made up from a coalition of clans. At certain times, a form of group marriage existed between the clans themselves.

This classless form of society was extremely democratic in its character. Everyone would participate in a general assembly to decide the important issues as they occurred, and their chiefs and officers would be elected for particular purposes. As Engels pointed out in his book, *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*:

“How wonderful this gentle constitution is in all its natural simplicity! No soldiers, gendarmes and policemen, no nobility, kings, regents, prefects or judges, no prisons, no law-suits, and still affairs run smoothly. All quarrels and disputes are settled by the entire community involved in them, either the Gens or the tribe or the various Gentes amongst themselves. Only in very rare cases the blood revenge is threatened as an extreme measure. Our capital punishment is simply a civilised form of

it, afflicted with all the advantages and drawbacks of civilisation ... the communistic household is shared by a number of families, the land belongs to the tribe, only the gardens are temporarily assigned to the households ... There cannot be any poor and destitute--the communistic households and the Gentes know their duties towards the aged, sick and disabled. All are free and equal--the women included. There is no room yet for slaves, nor for the subjection of foreign tribes”.

To the narrow philistine, who sees private property as a sacred god, these societies are looked upon with contempt. To the tribespeople, private property is completely alien. “The Indians,” explains the historian Heckewelder, “think that the great spirit has made the earth, and all that it contains, for the common good of mankind, when he stocked the country and gave them plenty of game, it was not for the good of the few, but of all. Everything is given in common to the sons of men. Whatever liveth on the land, whatever groweth out of the earth, and all that is in the rivers and waters was given

jointly to all, and everyone is entitled to his share”.

Common tribal property came under growing strain from the development with the private family, with private houses growing up alongside the communal dwellings. As time went on Common Land became later divided up to form the collective property of each family. The Matriarchal family gave way to the Patriarchal (male dominated) form, which became essential to the maintenance of the collective property.

This “family”, however, must not be looked up on as similar to that of today. As Paul Lafargue says, “the family was not reduced to its last and simplest expression, as it is in our day, where it is composed of three indispensable elements: the father, the mother and the offspring; it consisted of the father, the recognised head of the family; of the legitimate wife, and his concubines, living under the same roof; of his children, his younger brothers, with their wives and children, and his unmarried sisters: such a family comprised many members”.

The growth of private property in the later stages of primitive communism is regarded by Marxists as elements of the new society within the old. Eventually the qualitative accumulation of these new elements led to the qualitative break up of the old society.

With the growth of new means of production, particularly in agriculture, the question arose who should own them? The possession of tools, weapons, new metals, but above all the means to make them, enabled a family to rise above the terrible life and death struggle with the force of nature.

Then with the further development (trade developed at first between the different communities) of the productive forces, inequality began to appear within society. This had a profound effect upon the Old Order. For the first time, men and women were able to produce a surplus above and beyond his own needs, resulting in a revolutionary leap forward for humanity.

In the past, where war broke out between two tribes, it was uneconomic to take captives as slaves. After all, a captive would only have been able to

produce sufficient food for himself. No surplus was produced. The only use for a captive, given the shortage of food, was as a source of meat. This was the economic foundation of cannibalism.

But once a surplus was produced, it became economically viable to keep a slave who was forced to work for his master. The surplus obtained from a growing number of slaves was then appropriated by the new class of slave owners. But how were the slaves to be controlled and forced to work? The old tribes had no police force or means of coercion. Every individual was free and was a warrior.

The production of a surplus product smashed the old forms of society, enabling classes to crystallise. The existence of these classes required an apparatus of force to subject one class by another. Rich and poor, landowner and tenant, creditor and debtor all made their appearance in society. The clans which were social units of originally blood relations, began to disintegrate. The rich of different clans had more in common with each other

than they had with the poor of their own clan.

Slave society

Despite all the horrors which accompanied it, the emergence of class society was enormously progressive in further developing society. For the first time since humans evolved from the ape, a section of society was freed from the labour of eking out an existence. Those who were freed from work could now devote their time to science, philosophy and culture. Class society brought with it priests, clerks, officials and specialised craftsmen. The historical justification and function of the new ruling class was to develop the productive forces and take society forward. It was at this stage that civilisation first emerged.

Special institutions were now created to protect the interests of the ruling class. Special armed bodies of men, with their gaols, courts, executioners, etc., as well as new laws were all needed to protect private property of the slave owner. The state together with its appendages came into being and the freedom and equality of the old gentile system fell into ruins. New ideas and morals developed to

justify the new social and economic order.

By the 7th century B.C. the tribal aristocracy of Greece had become a ruling class of well-endowed slave owning landlords. According to the Ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, the majority of the population of Attica had been enslaved by this time.

With the growth of the city-states, the increase in the division of labour greatly accelerated. Not only between town and country, but between branches of trade and finance, merchant and usurer; new crafts sprung up together with a growing band of artists catering for the tastes and culture of the upper class.

The drive of the city-states for more and more slaves, resulted in continuous war. In the war against Macedonia by the Romans in 169 B.C., 70 cities in Epirus alone were sacked and 150,000 of their inhabitants sold as slaves. The slave economy was extremely wasteful and needed for its survival a continuous supply of slaves to replace those who had been injured or died. However the natural reproduction amongst slaves

was very slow owing to the harshness of their lot, thus the only real method of replenishment was by conquest.

Although the slave was much less productive than the free peasant on the land, the low cost of his maintenance made slavery far more profitable. The ruination of the free peasants led to large numbers fleeing to the town forming the de-classed lumpenproletariat of the slave societies. The latter relied upon the charity of the upper classes, who provided them with circuses for their amusement.

It was in this period that the revolutionary Christian movement emerged. Originally a group of primitive Communist sects with a deep hatred of the conquering Romans and their rich lackeys, they won much support from the poor and oppressed. These early Christian revolutionaries were prepared to use violent means to overthrow the upper classes and bring about "Heaven on Earth". They were therefore hounded by the authorities and were ruthlessly executed for treason against the Emperor. Later, Christianity was raised to the position

of state religion after being purged of its class hatred. The ruling class used it as a weapon to dupe and pacify the lower classes into accepting their earthly lot and to encourage their illusions in a better life after death.

The greater the surpluses the slave-owners obtained from the exploitation of the slaves, the greater became their extravagance, brilliance, arrogance and idleness. As more and more wars had to be waged to increase the slave population by conquest, the Roman Empire overstretched itself. Wars cannot be fought without soldiers and the best soldiers were the peasants. They were rapidly disappearing and thus had to be replaced by highly paid foreign mercenaries. The age of the “cheap slave” came to a rapid end bringing with it the decline of the slave empires.

Despite the various slave rebellions--the most famous being led by Spartacus--the slave did not prove to be a revolutionary class that could take society forward. As Marx was to point out, the class struggle would end “either in a revolutionary reconstruction of

society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes”. Karl Kautsky, the German Marxist, explained that “the great migrations, the flooding of the Roman Empire by the swarms of savage Germans did not mean the premature destruction of a flourishing high culture, but merely the conclusion of a dying civilisation and the formation of the basis for a new upswing of civilisation”.

The mighty slave civilisations had produced an enormous leap forward for society. One is amazed at the cultural achievements of Ancient Egypt and Babylon. The Greeks and Romans developed scientific knowledge to tremendous heights. Hero, the philosopher, had discovered the basic principles of the steam engine. The contributions of Archimedes, Pythagoras and Euclid advanced mathematics to the stage where the beginnings of mechanical engineering would have been possible. Nevertheless, slave society had reached its limits and internal decay and external factors were to bring it to destruction.

The rise of feudalism

“The last centuries of the declining Roman Empire and its conquest by the Barbarians destroyed a number of productive forces: agriculture had declined, industry had decayed for want of a market, trade had died out or had been violently suspended, the rural population and urban population had decreased.” (Karl Marx, The German Ideology.)

Over the centuries, the barbarian masses overran Europe; in the East, the Goths, Germans and Huns; in the North and West, the Scandinavian; in the South, the Arabs. In their conquest of territories they proceeded to ransack the towns, and settle down in the countryside, where they lived by means of primitive agriculture.

In these communities, they elected their village chiefs, however, as time passed by, chiefs were always chosen from the same family. The head of the privileged family, through succession, became the natural chief. The villages were at constant war with their neighbours, resulting in conquered lands being divided up with the greater share

accruing to the chief. He thus became the most powerful and propertied man in the community. In times of strife, he would guarantee the protection of those under him while in turn they were duty bound to grant military service to him. These peasants were later able to forgo their military service for a tribute in some form or another.

The authority of these village lords was extended into the surrounding countryside. The lord “owed justice, aid, and protection to his vassals, and these, in their turn, owed fidelity and homage to their lord”. (Lafargue, The Evolution of Property.) Wars and conquests served to crystallise these feudal relationships. The lords and barons together with their men-at-arms formed a new social hierarchy, sustained by the labour provided by their vassals. As Lafargue expressed it:

“So soon as the authority of the feudal nobility was constituted, it became in its turn, a source of trouble to the country whose defence it had been charged with. The barons, in order to enlarge their territories and thereby extend their power, carried on continual warfare

among themselves, only interrupted now and again by a short truce necessitated by the tillage of the fields ... The vanquished, when not killed outright or utterly despoiled, became the vassals of the conqueror, who seized upon a portion of their lands and vassals. The petty barons disappeared for the benefit of the great ones, who became potent feudatories, and established ducal courts at which the lords in vassalage were bound to attend”.

As feudal relations matured, the majority of farm land in Europe became divided into areas known as manors, each manor possessing its own lord and officials whose task was to manage the estate. The arable land was divided into two parts, about a third of it belonged to the lord (called a Demesne), while the rest was divided amongst his vassals. Pastures, wood and meadows were used as Common Land--a survival in fact from the days of Primitive Communism. Agriculture was to make great strides forward with the introduction of the three field system. The vassals share of the land, however, was further divided up into separate strips scattered

throughout the fields which meant a massive drain on productivity.

The social structure which developed under Feudalism, gave rise to new classes and groups. The social framework resembled a pyramid structure, headed by the king, aristocracy, the great churchmen and bishops. Under them were the privileged barons, dukes, counts and knights. On the bottom rungs of the social order were the freeman, serfs (Bordars, Cotters, Villeins), and slaves.

Unlike today, where the main body of wealth is created in the factories the land produced nearly all of social requirement. So land became the most important possession of the Feudal system. The more land one held, the more powerful one became. The ruling class ruled by their virtual monopoly of land to which the serfs were tied. Theoretically, the King owned all the land but in reality areas and domains were granted to dukes, who in turn granted tenancy to counts, who would have many vassals under him granted tenancy of much smaller parcels of land. All had to provide services to their

superiors in guaranteeing men-at-arms, payment of rent, etc.

Unlike the slave who owned nothing, the serf was a tenant of the lord. Unlike the slave, the serf has a vested interest in his plot of land. He had more rights than the slave: he could not be sold (neither could his family), providing some security, although the degree of serfdom and obligations varied. In return for this land and “rights”, the serf was forced to work for the lord of the manor for certain periods of the week, without pay. Other services were demanded of him (Boon Days) at harvest time, and whenever the lord needed assistance. The lords' needs came first. The serf could not leave the land, had to have the lords' permission if his children were to marry outside his demesne. Taxes were imposed on a serf's inheritance and female heirs to land had to get the permission of their overlord.

The new organisation of society based on landed property gave rise to a further development of the productive forces. This time the surplus value created by the serf's labour was

appropriated by the aristocratic lay and ecclesiastical ruling class.

In the words of the historian Meilly: “It is an economic maxim that productiveness increases in proportion as the freer constitution of society insures the workers an absolutely larger and more secure portion of the product of their labour. In other words, freer social forms have the direct effect of stimulating production.”

As the new classes crystallised, new forms of state apparatus also came into existence to preserve the feudal property forms. The new morality and ideology that arose from these forms cemented social relationships. The Church, which became more and more powerful, provided the spiritual foundations of the new order and with it the Popes became more powerful than King or Emperor, with churchlands extending to between a third and a half of the land in Christendom. The tithe that is collected amounted to a 10 per cent tax on all income, goods, etc.

In general the feudal state remained centrally weak until the rise of the

absolute monarchies of the 16th century. As a result, continual baronial wars shook the outlying provinces where robber barons built up their power and prestige, threatening the position of the central monarch. The struggle of the central monarch to subdue the regions is a characteristic feature of the period. The eventual defeat of these provincial lords, with their constant strife and war, enabled trade to develop to a higher level.

Trade was at a low level. The land, in fact, produced practically everything. It was a “natural” economy geared towards self-sufficiency. However, with the launching of the crusades, the expeditions to the Holy Land, new needs arose, and the merchants who supplied these needs, began to establish huge fairs in France, Belgium, England, Germany and Italy. These periodic fairs played an essential part in the growth of European trade, and helped to establish a strong class of rich merchants. Money relations began to erode the straight jacket of feudal society.

Hand in hand with the development of trade, went the growth of the towns. The

merchant class that arose in the town clashed with the traditional standards and restrictions of feudalism.

The Church, for instance, considered the practice of usury as a sin, using the threat of excommunication against those who promoted it.

In his very good book, Man's Worldly Goods, Leo Huberman explains the nature of the conflict:

“The whole atmosphere of feudalism was one of confinement, whereas the whole atmosphere of merchant activity in the town was one of freedom. Town land belonged to feudal lords, bishops, nobles, kings. These feudal lords at first looked upon their town land in no different light from that in which they looked on the other land ... All these forms (feudal dues, taxes, services) were feudal, based on the ownership of the soil. And all these forms had changed as far the towns were concerned. Feudal regulations and feudal justice were fixed by custom and difficult to alter. But trade by its very nature is active, changing, and

impatient of barriers. It could not fit into the rigid feudal frame.”

Therefore old relationships had to be challenged and changed. The towns began to demand their freedom and independence, and gradually town charters were conceded, some by agreement, others by force.

Trade itself gave rise to new forms of wealth. No longer was land the sole source of power and privilege, as money acquired in trading assumed a much greater importance. In the towns was born the wealthy merchant oligarchy which controlled and regulated the small scale individual production, through the guild system. With the further division of labour, Craft Guilds were established comprising the guild master, apprentices and journeymen. As more and more wealth was created through production the guild masters (employers of labour) came into sharp conflict with their journeymen (workers). By the 15th century, actual journeymen's unions were formed to protect their interests.

The introduction of the money economy (which had only a very limited character in slave society) slowly undermined the basis of the feudal system. Its laws and customs were modified to correspond with the new development. As serfs ran away to the towns to make their fortunes, money values began to transcend the old relationships, Labour dues being replaced by rented property. The impact of the Black Death, in the mid-14th century, greatly accelerated the process. Historians have estimated between 30 and 50 per cent of the population of England, Germany, the Low Countries, and France were wiped out by the Great Plague. This in turn resulted in the chronic shortage of labour, which forced many landowners to introduce wage labour to overcome their difficulties.

The rise of the absolute monarch

The nation-state as we know it today did not always exist. Peoples' allegiances at this time belonged not to the nation but to the lord, the town, the locality, or the guild. People considered themselves not French, English, etc., but people of a town or city. Every Christian was a member of the Roman Catholic Church, which in turn ruled over Christendom, and thus was the greatest power of all.

With the growth of wealth in the towns, a capitalist class began to arise which demanded conditions suitable for the unhindered development of trade and commerce. They wanted order and security. The struggle for independence of the towns from their feudal overlords, the continuous battles between local barons, the pillaging that followed, all gave rise to the need for a central authority, a nation state.

The conflict between the central monarch and the great barons (a struggle between two sections of the ruling class) ended with a victory for the king. He was supported by the merchants and middle class, who provided the money to raise the armies

he required. The emergence of the nation state together with the centralised monarchy ushered in a great economic advance. For their support, the monarch granted certain monopolies and privileges to sections of the middle class and the next stage was set for the clash between the national monarch and the interests of the international church.

The late 15th century saw the beginning of the voyages of discovery. Men such as Columbus and Vasco Da Gama were financed by rich merchants to seek new areas of exploitation and “spread the Word of God”. Joint stock companies were established to promote the financing of greater exploitation, for plunder and profit.

With the massive profits from the voyages, many merchants and financiers became the real centres of power and wealth. Nobles, aristocrats and monarchs became debtors to the rich merchants. One banking family, the Fuggors, were even able to decide who was to be made Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire!

The new economic developments were giving rise to a capitalist formation. The basis of the feudal economy had begun to disintegrate with the growth in power and wealth of the rising bourgeoisie. New values, ideas, philosophies, and morals evolved out of the new relationships. The old ruling class stubbornly resisted the changes.

As Marx explained:

“At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relation of production or--this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms--with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution”. Later on, Marx adds: “No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society.”

The old society has been undermined during the previous period. Probably one of the greatest challenges to the old order was the attack on Catholicism. In this period, the Church was not just a religious institution but the chief bulwark of the social order. Apart from being a powerful landowner, it collected a tithe from everyone, had its courts and special privileges, controlled education and shaped the political and moral outlook of the people. As Charles I once said: “People are governed by the pulpit more than the sword in times of peace.” The Church censored books, and used the threat of excommunication against dissenters. It is said that this was a very religious period but this is wildly exaggerated by historians. Rather than people actually living according to the precepts of the Bible, religion was rather used to justify the Old Order. Everything, including political thought, was expressed in religious terms. Those who wished to undermine the system, had to first challenge the monopoly of Catholicism.

In the early 16th century, the absolute monarchies came into conflict with the Catholic Church themselves. The

Protestant Reformation ushered in by Luther, supplied the weapons in the struggle against Papal power. In England, Henry VIII broke with Catholicism and raided the wealth of the monasteries, which was dissipated in expensive European and Irish wars.

The capitalist revolution

The Puritanism of the Calvin variety suited the outlook and morality of the rising middle class in town and country with its emphasis on self-reliance and personal success. The middle class was now set to rise quickly after adapting to the inflation rampant between 1540-1640, in which prices rose by more than fourfold and came increasingly into conflict with the old ruling class.

In England, the struggle between the new bourgeoisie and the old order took the form of the civil war. The New Model Army of Oliver Cromwell led the middle class into the armed struggle against the King and Old Order. In 1649, the King was beheaded and a capitalist republic declared. Cromwell, resting for support on the army, established himself as the head of a Bonapartist military dictatorship. The elements of left-wing democracy and its proponents (the levellers and diggers), who threatened capitalist property rights, had to be mercilessly quashed. From then on the regime rested on a narrow social basis--the armed forces. The capitalist regime under these critical

crises circumstances reduced itself in the Bonapartist fashion to the rule of one man.

The feudal structures were dismantled together with the House of Lords and monarchy. The old ruling class had been defeated, and the lower classes kept in their place. The struggle of the Parliamentarians against the King has been seen by historians and even by some contemporaries as a struggle against tyranny and for religious liberty but as Marx commented:

“Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradiction of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production”.

Leon Trotsky, one of the leaders of the Russian Revolution, once noted: “Revolutions have always in history been followed by counter-revolutions. Counter-revolutions have always

thrown society back, but never as far back as the starting point of the revolution". So it was in 1660 and 1689, where the big bourgeoisie hurriedly made a compromise with the "bourgeois" elements of the aristocracy. The monarchy and House of Lords were restored although from then on they could never play the same role as their predecessors, on the contrary, they became part and parcel of the capitalist state. The bourgeois men of property concerned themselves with their future, and of keeping the lower orders in their place with their power carefully checked.

One hundred years later, the French Capitalist revolution was carried through to completion without any compromise being struck. The French Revolution, like its English counter-part, began with a split in the ruling class. The King and his ministers clashed over a scheme to avoid state bankruptcy, with the Parliament (which represented the nobility, higher clergy, the court clique, etc.). The latter's appeal against the government tyranny took on unforeseen flesh and rioting broke out in the streets of the towns and cities. It brought to a head all the simmering

discontent of the middle class and lower orders against the regime. “The revolt of the nobility was,” explains George Rude, “perhaps, a curtain-raiser rather than a revolution which, by associating the middle and lower classes in common action against King and aristocracy, was unique in contemporary Europe.” Despite the attempts at reform from above, they were insufficient to prevent revolution from below.

As in all popular revolutions the masses burst onto the scene of history. The most self-sacrificing came to the fore, and pushed the revolution far to the left. Between 1789 and 1793 the old feudal regime and aristocracy had been completely swept away. The regime was headed by the revolutionary middle class, the Jacobins, who were supported and pushed by the plebeian masses made up of wage-earners and small craftsmen. A shift to the right occurred in 1794 with the government of the Directory coming to power. This in its turn gave way to a new political counter-revolution, which brought to power the law and order type regime of Napoleon Bonaparte. Nevertheless, the old order

had been broken, and the new bourgeois property rights were to remain intact. The shift of political power was not accompanied by a social change backwards, i.e., it did not bring a return to the feudal order but was a political change brought about through the struggles of different sections of the capitalist class itself.

The triumph of capitalism

The great Bourgeois revolutions cleared the path for Capitalism. The agrarian changes ensured the growth of capitalist agriculture, where the old feudal estates had been broken up and distributed to the peasants. In England, the conversion of a section of the aristocracy before the revolution prepared the way for the ruination of the peasantry itself. Governments now, instead of acting as a brake on trade and industry, actually championed its cause.

Through robbery, enclosure and plunder and competition, the means of production became concentrated into fewer and fewer hands. The ruination of the peasantry provided a pool of labour-power in the towns and cities. The class structure became more simplified. On the one hand were the capitalists and on the other the propertyless proletarians. All that these workers possessed was their ability to work. The only way they could remain alive was to sell their labour-power to the capitalists in return for wages. In the process of production, the proletarian produces more value than he receives in wages, the surplus

value being expropriated by the capitalists. In its search for profit, amidst competition from rivals, the capitalist class is forced to introduce new methods of production, in this way Capitalism has, historically, played a progressive role continually revolutionising the productive forces.

Its export of commodities and then Capital leads the capitalist class to create “a world after its own image”. The productive forces, technique and science gradually outgrew the nation state which protected it.

Imperialism

The period from 1870 to 1900 saw the division of the world amongst the main powers. In 1870 one-tenth of Africa had been divided up; by 1900 some nine-tenths of the “Dark Continent” were in the hands of Britain, France or one of the other European Empires. By 1914 this process of world division had been completed, and capitalism entered its highest stage of Imperialism. Huge trusts and monopolies had grown out of the earlier period of competition. “The state had more and more fused with the monopolies and financial institutions and acted increasingly in their interest. Production in this epoch is accompanied by the export of capital itself.” (Lenin)

The imperialist stage brings with it the threat of world war, in the struggle for new markets, etc. Due to the carving up of the world and the tremendous growth in production, markets can now only be obtained by a new re-division of the world which inevitably leads to conflict on a world scale. World war indicates the contradictions between the private ownership of the means of production

on the one hand and the nation state on the other. But unlike previous societies Capitalism has furnished the material pre-requisites for the new socialist order that can guarantee plenty for all.

The proletariat is the only consistent revolutionary class capable of carrying through to a conclusion the Socialist Revolution. This stems from its particular place in social production. The working class is disciplined in the factories and forced to co-operate in the productive process. It organises itself into large trade unions and then into its own independent party. Marxism, as opposed to all other theories, provides it with a clear ideology and tasks in its mission to overthrow Capitalism. The Bolshevik Party, led by Lenin and Trotsky, provided a living model to the workers of the world.

The peasantry and the middle classes are incapable of playing a leading role, due to their social position. The peasantry is scattered in the countryside, and have no real conception of unity or internationalism. These middle layers of society follow either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat.

The peasantry have been in fact, the classical tool of Bonapartism--a regime based on the armed forces, balancing between the classes. In the epoch of imperialism and the decay of monopoly capitalism, if the working class fails to win the middle layers to its Socialist banner, they will be driven into the arms of reaction.

The law of uneven and combined development

From a progressive social system, Capitalism has now become a fetter upon production and the further development of humanity. Marx believed that the proletariat would come to power first in the advanced capitalist countries of Britain, Germany, and France. However, with the emergence of Imperialism, Capitalism, in the words of Lenin, “broke at its weakest link” in backward Russia.

Society does not develop in a straight line, but according to its laws of uneven and combined development. The uneven growth of society on the world scale is constantly cut across by the introduction of new products and ideas from different social systems. The backwardness of semi-feudal Russia was supplemented by the most modern techniques of production in its cities, due to the enormous amount of foreign capital from France and Britain. The new industrial proletariat which had recently come into being accepted the most advanced ideas of the working class: Marxism.

In many of the under-developed countries the festering sores of much needed land reform, autocracy, national oppression, and economic stagnation, have resulted in enormous discontent. The tasks of the bourgeois democratic revolution, which would have laid the basis for capitalist development, have either only been partially carried out or not at all.

In these countries the Capitalist class has come on the scene too late to play a similar role as its revolutionary counter-part of the 17th and 18th century. As in Russia before 1917, they are too weak and tied by a thousand strings--through marriage and mortgage--to the land owners and imperialists. They both now acquire a common hatred of the emerging proletariat. The nationalist capitalist class prefers to cling to the old order rather than appeal to the lower classes to carry through the anti-feudal revolution.

The only class capable of carrying out the revolution is the proletariat by uniting around itself the poorer sections of the peasantry. Once the working class

comes to power as in October 1917, it is then able to give the land to the peasants, expel the imperialists and unify the country. However, the proletariat would not stop at these measures but would then proceed to the socialist tasks: nationalisation of the basic industries, land, and financial institutions.

The Russian Revolution was the greatest event in the whole of human history. For the first time the working class took power, swept out the Capitalists, landlords and gangsters and organised a “democratic workers' state”. It was to be the beginning of the international socialist revolution and fully confirmed the theory of Permanent Revolution.

Unfortunately, the betrayal of the socialist revolution in Germany, and other countries, led to the isolation of the revolution in a backward, devastated country. The destruction of the War, mass illiteracy, civil war, exhaustion, placed terrible strains upon the weak working class, and contributed to the degeneration of the revolution. It was these objective conditions which

encouraged the growth of bureaucratism in the state, trade unions and the Party. Stalin rose to power on the back of this new bureaucratic caste. The individual in history represents not himself, but the interests of a group, caste or class in society.

Stalinism and its monstrous dictatorship grew not from the Bolshevik Party or socialist revolution, but out of the isolation and material backwardness of Russia. It destroyed the workers' democracy in order to preserve its privileges and power.

The Stalinist regime nevertheless rested on the new property forms of nationalised industry and the plan of production. The Soviets (Workers' Councils) and workers democracy were crushed in the Stalinist political counter-revolution. Only by a new political revolution could the Russian working class have restored the workers' democracy which existed under Lenin and Trotsky. This would not mean a return to capitalism, but an end to the privileged bureaucratic elite, as the masses themselves become

involved in the running of society and the state.

The socialist transformation

The socialist transformation ushers in a new and higher form of society by breaking the fetters on the development of the productive forces. The obstacle of private property and the nation state are swept away, allowing the socialised property to be planned in the interests of the majority.

The Socialist Revolution cannot be confined to one country, but puts the world revolution on the order of the day. The world economy and the world division of labour created by capitalism demands an international solution. A Socialist United States of Europe would prepare the ground for a World Federation of Socialist States, and the international planning of production. This in turn would provide the basis for the “planned and harmonious production of goods for the satisfaction of human wants”.

One of the first tasks of the victorious working class would be the destruction of the old state machine. In all class societies the state came into existence as “an organ of class rule, an organ for the oppression of one class by another”.

This raises the question, does the working class need a state? The anarchists reply no. But they fail to understand that some form of force is required to keep the old landowners, bankers and capitalists in their place. The proletariat therefore has to construct a new type of state to represent its interests. In a workers' state, the majority are holding a tiny minority of ex-capitalists in check and therefore the massive bureaucratic state of the past is not needed. This "Dictatorship of the Proletariat" or Workers' Democracy, as Trotsky preferred to call it, vastly broadened and extended the highest forms of bourgeois democracy.

Bourgeois democracy was defined by Marx as the workers deciding every five years which section of the ruling class would misrepresent their interests in Parliament. Everyone could say what they liked, provided that the boards of the monopolies could actually decide what was to be done.

The new workers state would extend democracy from the political to the economic sphere with the

nationalisation of the major monopolies. New organs of power, such as the Soviets in Russia, based on the armed people, constitute “working bodies, executive and legislative at the same time”. Bureaucracy would be replaced by the involvement of the masses in the running of the state and society. In order to prevent the growth of officialdom, the proletariat of Paris in 1871 and of Russia in 1917 introduced the following measures:

(1) Election of all officials, with the right to recall. (2) No standing army, but an armed people. (3) No official to receive more than a skilled worker. (4) Positions in the state to be rotated amongst the people.

With the reduction of the working week, the masses are given the opportunity to involve themselves in the state, and obtain the key to culture, science and art. For as Engels once said, if art, science and government remain the preserve of the minority, they will use and abuse this position in their own interest, as was the case in the Stalinist countries.

The state arose historically with the emergence of class society. Thus, from its very inception, the workers' state begins to wither away, as classes themselves dissolve within society. This is why Engels characterised the proletarian state as a “semi-state”.

“Under socialism much of 'primitive' democracy will inevitably be revived, since, for the first time in the history of civilised society, the mass of the people will rise to taking an independent part, not only in voting and elections, but also in the everyday administration of the state. Under Socialism all will govern in turn and will soon become accustomed to no one governing”. (Lenin, State and Revolution.)

In this lower stage of Socialism as Marx called it, one sees society, “just as it emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it comes”. (Marx, Critique of the Gotha Programme.) Although the exploitation of man by man has been ended, production has not yet reached a high enough level to completely eradicate

inequality or class differences. People still have to follow the principle: “He who does not work shall not eat”. The state, despite its transitory character, remains the guardian of inequality.

Socialism, the classless society

Yet with huge strides forward in production, based on the most advanced science and conscious planning, humanity enters the higher realms of real society. Classes and the state will have completely withered away, as society now adopts the slogan “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”. The antitheses of town and country, and mental and physical labour disappear with the further revolution in the productive forces. In the words of Lenin, “the narrow horizon of bourgeois law”, which compels one to calculate with the heartlessness of a Shylock whether one has not worked half an hour more than somebody else, whether one is getting less pay than somebody else--this narrow horizon will then be left behind. There will then be no need for society, in distributing the products, to regulate the quantity to be received by each; each will take freely according to his needs.

The barbarous nature of class society would have ended once and for all. The prehistory of humankind would have been completed. The productive forces

built up over thousands of years of class rule now laid the basis for classless society where the state and division of labour were rendered superfluous. Humanity sets itself the task of conquering nature, and opens up the tremendous wonders of science and technology. In the words of Engels, “the government of persons is replaced by the administration of things”.

And Trotsky pointed out that, “Once he has done with the anarchic forces of his own society man will set to work on himself, in the pestle and retort of the chemist. For the first time mankind will regard itself as raw material, or at best as a physical and psychic semi-finished product. Socialism will mean a leap from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom in this sense also, that the man of today, with all his contradictions and lack of harmony, will open the road for a new and happier race”. (Leon Trotsky, In Defence of October.)

INTRODUCTION TO MARXIST ECONOMICS

Introduction

Today, under the impact of the capitalist crisis, many workers have developed a thirst for economics. They are attempting to understand the forces which dominate their lives. This brief introduction to Marxist economics attempts to provide the class conscious worker not with a complete account of economics, but a guide to the basic laws of motion of capitalist society dominating his existence.

The shallowness of capitalist economics is demonstrated by their inability to understand the crisis affecting their system. Its role is to cover up the exploitation of the working class and to “prove” the superiority of capitalist society. Their quack “theories” and “solutions” are incapable of patching up the rotten and diseased nature of capitalism. Only the transformation of society on socialist lines and the introduction of a planned economy can end the nightmare of unemployment, slump and chaos.

The right wing labour leaders have rejected their old god Keynes, to be replaced by “orthodox” economic solutions: cuts, wage restraint and deflation. The left reformists still cling to the capitalist policies of yesterday (reflation, import controls, etc.), which have been recognised as totally ineffective under capitalism.

Only with a Marxist understanding of capitalist society can the conscious worker cut through the lies and distortion of the capitalist economists and combat their influence within the Labour Movement.

Conditions for capitalism

Today, modern production is concentrated in the hands of giant companies. Unilever, ICI, Fords, British Petroleum, are some examples of the firms which dominate our lives. Although it is true that small businesses do exist, they really represent the production of the past and not the present. Modern production is essentially a mass, large-scale business.

At present, 200 top companies together with 35 banks and finance houses control the British economy, and account for 85 per cent of output. This development has come about over the past few hundred years through ruthless competition, crisis and war. At the time when the classical economists predicted free trade in the future, Marx explained the development of monopoly from competition as the weaker firms went to the wall. Monopoly capitalism grew out of and abolished free competition.

At first sight, it looks as if goods and things are produced mainly for people's needs. Obviously every society has to do this. But under capitalism, goods are

not merely produced to satisfy someone's want or need, but primarily for sale. That is the paramount function of capitalist industry.

In the famous words of the ex-chairman of British Leyland, Lord Stokes, "I'm in business to make money, not cars!" This is a perfect expression of the aspirations of the entire capitalist class.

The capitalist process of production requires the existence of certain conditions. Firstly, the existence of a large class of propertyless workers who are obliged to sell themselves piecemeal in order to live. Thus the Tory conception of a "property owning democracy" is an absurdity under capitalism, because if the mass of the population owned sufficient property to be self-sufficient, the capitalists would not find the workers to produce their profits. Secondly, the means of production must be concentrated in the hands of the capitalists. Over the centuries, the peasants and those who owned their own means of subsistence were ruthlessly crushed and their means of life appropriated by the capitalists and landlords. They in turn

hire the workers to work these means of production and produce surplus value.

Value and commodities

How does capitalism work? How are workers exploited? Where does profit come from? How are slumps caused?

In order to answer these questions, we first need to learn the key to the mystery: what is value? Having solved this problem, the other answers fall into place. An understanding of value is essential, for an understanding of the economics of capitalist society.

To begin with, all the capitalist firms produce goods or services, or more correctly they produce commodities. That is a good or service produced for sale only. Of course, someone may make something for his or her own personal use. Before capitalism existed, many people had to. But this is not a commodity. Capitalist production is above all the creation and “immense accumulation of commodities”. That is why Marx himself started his investigation of capitalism with an analysis of the character of the commodity itself.

Every commodity has a use-value for people. That means they are useful to

someone otherwise they could not be sold. This use-value is limited to the physical properties of the commodity.

They also contain a value. What is it and how can it be shown?

If we leave the use of money out for the time being, commodities, when they are exchanged, fall into certain proportions.

For example:

**1 pair of shoes) 1 watch) = 10 yards of cloth
3 bottles of whisky) 1 car tyre)**

Each of the items on the left can be exchanged for 10 yards of cloth. They also, in the same amounts, can be exchanged with one another.

This simple example shows that the exchange value of these different commodities expresses something contained in them. But what makes a pair of shoes = 10 yards of cloth? Or 1 watch = 3 bottles of whisky? And so on...

Well, obviously, there must be something common to all. Clearly it is neither weight, colour, nor hardness. Again, it is not because they are useful. Bread after all is worth less than a Roll

Royce, yet one is a necessity and the other luxury. So what is the common quality? The only thing in common is they are all products of human labour.

The amount of human labour contained in a commodity is expressed in time: weeks, days, hours, minutes.

To go back to the example: all these commodities can be expressed in terms of their common factor, labour-time.

5 hours (labour) worth of shoes 5 hours (labour) worth of tyres 5 hours (labour) worth of watches 5 hours (labour) worth of whisky 5 hours (labour) worth of cloth

Average labour

If we look at commodities as use-values (their utility), we see them as a “shoe”, “watch”, etc., as products of a particular kind of labour ... the labour of the cobbler, watchmaker, etc. But in exchange, commodities are looked at differently. The special character is lost sight of and they appear as so many units of average labour. In exchange we are now comparing the amounts of human labour in general contained in the commodities. All labour, in exchange, is reduced to average simple units of labour.

It is true that the commodity produced by skilled labour contains more value than that produced by unskilled. Therefore in exchange, the units of skilled labour are reduced to so many units of unskilled, simple labour. For example, the ratio of 1 skilled unit = 3 unskilled units, or simply skilled labour is worth three times as much as unskilled.

Explained simply, the value of commodity is determined by the amount of average labour used in its production. (Or how long it takes to

produce). But left like this, it appears that the lazy worker produces more values than the most efficient worker!

Let us take the example of a shoemaker who decides to use the outdated methods of the Middle Ages to produce shoes. Using this method, it takes him a whole day to make a pair of shoes. When he tries to sell them on the market, he will find that they will only fetch the same as shoes produced by the better equipped more modern factories.

If these factories produce a pair of shoes in, say half an hour, they will contain less labour (and therefore less value) and will be sold cheaper. This will drive the shoemaker using medieval methods out of business. His labour producing a pair of shoes after half an hour is wasted labour, and unnecessary under modern conditions. On pain of extinction he will be forced to introduce modern techniques and produce shoes at least equal to the necessary time developed by society.

At any given time, using the average labour, machines, methods, etc., all commodities take a particular time to

make. This is governed by the level of technique in society. In the words of Marx, all commodities must be produced in a socially necessary time. Any more labour-time spent over and above this will be useless labour, causing costs to rise and making the firm uncompetitive.

So to be more precise, the value of a commodity is determined by the amount of socially necessary labour in the article. Naturally, this labour time is continually changing as new techniques and methods of work are introduced. Competition drives the inefficient to the wall.

Thus we can also understand why precious gems have more value than everyday items. More socially necessary labour time is needed to find, and extract the gems, than the production of ordinary commodities. Their value therefore being considerably higher.

Again a thing can be a use value without having any value, i.e. a useful thing that has had no labour time spent on its production: air, rivers, virgin soil, natural meadows, etc. Therefore labour

is not the only source of wealth, i.e. use values, but nature too is a source.

From the above we can see that an increase in productivity will increase the amount of things produced (material wealth), but can reduce the value of the things concerned, i.e. the amount of labour in each commodity is less. Increased productivity therefore results in an increase in wealth. With two coats two people can be clothed, with one coat only one person. Nevertheless, the increase in the quantity of material wealth may correspond with a fall in the magnitude of its value.

Money

As a result of the difficulties in exchange by using the methods of barter, more frequently a common article was used as “money”. Over the centuries one commodity--gold--became singled out to play this role as the “universal equivalent”.

Instead of saying a good is worth so much butter, meat, cloth, etc., it became expressed in terms of gold. The money expression of value is price. Gold was used because of its qualities. It concentrates much value in a small amount, can easily be divided into coins, and is also hard wearing.

As with all commodities, the value of gold itself is determined by the amount of labour-time spent on its production. For example, say it takes 40 hours labour to produce one ounce of gold. Then all the other goods that take the same time to produce are equal to that ounce of gold. Those that take half the time equal half the amount, etc.

**One ounce of gold = 40 hours labour
1/2 ounce of gold = 20 hours labour
1/4 ounce of gold = 10 hours of labour**

Therefore: One car (40 hours labour) = 1 ounce of gold One table (10 hours labour) = 1/4 ounce of gold

Due to the changes in productive technique and the increase in the productivity of labour, all the values of commodities are continually fluctuating, like so many trains in a station pulling in and out at differing times. If you take any train as a standard which is moving off to gauge the movement of others, it would lead to confusion. Only by standing on the firm platform can you judge accurately what is happening. In relation to the changes of all goods, gold acts as the measure. Although the most stable, even this is in constant motion, as no commodity has a totally fixed value.

Prices of commodities

The law of value governs the price of goods. As explained earlier, the value of commodities is equal to the amount of labour contained in it. In theory, the value is equal to its price. Yet, in reality, the price of a commodity tends to be either above or below its real value. This fluctuation is caused by different influences on market price, such as the growth of monopoly. The differences of supply and demand also have a great effect. For instance, there may be a surplus of a commodity in the market, and the price that day may be far below the real value, or if there was a shortage, the price would rise above it. The effects of supply and demand have led bourgeois economists to believe that this law is the sole factor in determining price. What they were unable to explain was that prices always fluctuate around a definite level. What that level is, is not determined by supply and demand, but by the labour time spent in the articles' production. A lorry will always be more expensive than a plastic bucket.

Profits

Some “clever” people have invented the theory that profits arise from buying cheap and selling dear. In Wage, Labour and Capital, Marx explains the nonsense of this argument:

“What a man would certainly win as a seller he would lose as a purchaser. It would not do to say that there are men who are buyers without being sellers or consumers without being producers. What these people pay to the producers, they must first get from them for nothing. If a man first takes your money and afterwards returns that money in buying your commodities you will never enrich yourself by selling your commodities too dear to that same man. This sort of transaction might diminish a loss, but would help in realising a profit”.

Labour power

In obtaining the “factors of production”, the capitalist looks on the “labour market” as just another branch of the general market for commodities. The abilities and energies of the worker are seen as just another commodity. He advertises for so many “hands”.

What we have to be clear about is what the capitalist has bought. The worker has sold not his labour but his ability to work. This Marx calls his labour power. Labour power is a commodity governed by the same laws as other commodities. Its value is determined by the labour-time necessary for its production. Labour power is the ability of the worker to work. It is “consumed” by the capitalist in the actual labour-process. But this presupposes the existence and health and strength of the worker. The production of labour power therefore means the worker's self-maintenance and the reproduction of his species, to provide new generations of “hands” for the capitalist.

The labour-time necessary for the worker's maintenance is the labour-time it takes to produce the means of

subsistence for him and his family: food, clothing, fuel, etc. The amount of this varies in different countries, different climates, and different historical periods. What is adequate subsistence for a labourer in Calcutta would not be adequate for a Welsh miner. What was adequate for a Welsh miner fifty years ago would not be for a Midlands car worker today. Into this question, unlike the value of other commodities, there enters a historical and even moral element. Nevertheless, in any given country, at any particular stage of historical development, the “standard of living” is known. (Incidentally, it is precisely the creation of new needs which is the spur to all kinds of human progress).

Not cheated!

Apart from the daily reproduction of his labour power, and the reproduction of the species, at a certain stage in the development of capitalist technique, a certain amount has to be provided for the education of the workers in order to fit them for the conditions of modern industry and raise their productivity.

Unlike most commodities, labour power is paid for only after it has been consumed. The workers thus philanthropically extend credit to their employers! (weeks in hand, petty cheating and bankruptcy, leading to loss of wages).

Despite this, the worker has not been cheated. He has arrived at an agreement of his own free will. As with all other commodities, equivalent values are exchanged: the worker's commodity, labour power, is sold to the boss at the “going rate”. Everybody is satisfied. And if the worker is not, then he is free to leave and find work elsewhere ♦ if he can♦

The sale of labour power poses a problem. If “nobody is cheated”, if the

worker receives the full value of his commodity, where does exploitation come from? Where does the capitalist make his profits? The answer is that the worker sells the capitalist not his labour (which is realised in the work process), but his labour power--his ability to work.

Having purchased this as a commodity, the capitalist is free to use it as he pleases. As Marx explained: “From the instant he steps into the work shop, the use-value of his labour power, and therefore also its use, which is labour, belongs to the capitalist”.

Surplus value

We will see from the following example that the capitalist purchases labour power because it is the only commodity which can produce new values above and beyond its own value.

Let us take a worker who is employed to spin cotton into yarn. He gets paid £1 per hour and works an 8 hour day.

After 4 hours he had produced 100lbs of yarn at a total value of £20. This value of £20 is made up from the following:

**Raw materials £11 (cotton, spindle, power) Depreciation £1 (wear and tear)
New value £8**

The new value created is sufficient to pay the workers' wages for the full 8 hours. At this point the capitalist has covered all his costs (including his total wage bill). But as yet no surplus value (profit) has been produced.

During the next 4 hours another 100lbs of yarn is produced valued again at £20. And again £8 of new value is created, but this time the wages have already been covered. Therefore this new value (£8) is surplus value. From this comes

rent (to the landlord), interest (to the moneylender) and profit (to the industrialist). Thus surplus value or profit, in the words of Marx, is the unpaid labour of the working class.

The working day

The secret of the production of surplus value is that the worker continues to work longer after he has produced the value necessary to reproduce the value of his labour power (his wages). “The fact that half a day's labour is necessary to keep the labourer alive does not in any way prevent him from working a full day.” (Marx).

The worker has sold his commodity and cannot complain about the way he is used, any more than the tailor can sell a suit and then demand that his customer must not wear it as often as he likes. The working day is therefore so organised as to give the maximum benefits from the labour power he has bought. In this lay the secret of the transformation of money into capital.

Constant capital

In production itself, machines and raw materials lose their use value, they become burnt up and become absorbed into the new product. They transfer their value into the new commodity.

This is clear in relation to raw materials (wood, metal, dyes, fuel, etc.) which are wholly consumed in the process of production, only to reappear in the properties of the article produced.

Machines on the other hand, do not disappear in the same way. But they do deteriorate in the course of production, thus dying a protracted death. The exact moment when a machine is finally declared redundant is no more possible to fix with exactitude than the exact moment of a person's death. But just as the insurance company, on the basis of the theory of averages, makes very accurate (and profitable) calculations concerning the life-span of men and women, so the capitalist know by experience and calculation roughly how long a machine will last.

The depreciation of machinery, its daily loss of use value, is calculated on this

basis and added on to the cost of the article produced. Thus, the means of production add to the commodity their own value in proportion as the deterioration of its use value unfolds. The means of production, therefore, cannot transfer to the commodity more than that value which they themselves lose in the process of production. It is thus called constant capital.

Variable capital

While the means of production add no new value to the commodities produced, but only deteriorate, the labour of the worker not only preserves, but adds new value to his product by merely working. If the process of work were to stop at that moment when the worker had produced articles to the value of his own labour power, e.g. in 4 hours (£8) this is the only bit of new value created.

But the work process does not stop there. This would only cover the expenses of the capitalist in hiring the workmen. The capitalist does not hire workers for charity but for profit. Having “freely” entered into a contract with the capitalist, the worker must labour on, producing extra value and beyond that sum agreed on as his wage. The means of production on the one hand, and labour power on the other--the “factors of production” of bourgeois economics--represent the different forms assumed by the original capital in the second phase of the cycle:

MONEY COMMODITY MONEY

(purchase) (production) (sale)

Capitalist economists treat these factors as equal. Marxism distinguishes between that part of capital which does not undergo any change of value in the process of production (machines, tools, raw materials) and that part represented by labour power which creates new value. The first part of capital called constant capital, and the latter variable capital. The total value of a commodity is made up from constant capital, variable capital and surplus value, i.e. $C + V + S$.

Necessary and surplus labour

The labour performed by the working class can be divided up into two parts:

(1) Necessary Labour: This is the part of the labour process which is needed to cover the cost of wages.

(2) Surplus Labour: This is the extra labour performed in addition to labour, which produces the profits.

To increase his profits, the capitalist is constantly attempting to reduce his wages bill. He does this by attempting to (1) lengthen the working day, introduce new shift patterns, etc., (2) increase productivity to cover wages more quickly, (3) resist wage rises or attempt to cut them.

Rate of surplus value

Since the whole purpose of capitalist production is to extract surplus value from the labour of the working class, the proportion between variable capital (wages) and the surplus value (profits) is of the greatest importance. One is expanding or contracting at the expense of the other. This struggle over the surplus constitutes the class struggle. What concerns the capitalist is not so much the amount of surplus value produced but the rate of surplus value. For every pound he lays out in capital he expects a big return. The rate of surplus value is the rate of exploitation of labour by capital. It may be defined as S/V or surplus labour/necessary labour, (it is the same thing expressed in a different way), where V = Variable capital, S = Surplus value. For example in a small plant, total capital of £500 is divided between Constant (£410) and Variable (£90). Through the process of production the value of the commodities have increased by £90 surplus: $(C+V) + S$ or $(410 + £90) + £90$ surplus. The total new value is £590. It is the variable capital that is the living labour, i.e. it produces the new value of

surplus value. So the relative increase in the value produced by variable capital gives us the rate of surplus value $S/V = £90/£90 = 100\%$ rate of surplus value.

The rate of profit

Under the pressure of competition at home and abroad, the capitalist is compelled to constantly revolutionise the means of production and to increase productivity. The need to expand compels him to spend a larger and larger proportion of his capital on machinery and raw materials and less on labour power, thus diminishing the proportion of variable capital to constant capital. Side by side with automation goes the concentration of capital, the liquidation of the smaller concerns and the domination of the economy by giant monopolies. This constitutes a change in the technical composition of capital.

But since it is the variable capital (labour power) alone which is the source of surplus value (profit), the bigger amounts invested in constant capital results in the tendency for the rate of profit to fall, although with new investments profits can increase enormously they do not rise proportionately to the much greater capital outlay.

For example, take a small capitalist with a total capital of £150 made up of

Constant Capital (£50) and Variable (£100). He employs 10 men at £10 per day making tables and chairs. After one day work they produce £250 in total value:

Total Capital : The wages paid = £100

The constant capital = £50

Surplus value = £100

The rate of surplus value can be calculated: $S/V = £100/£100 = 100\%$. The rate of profit is calculated as the ratio between total capital and surplus value: Surplus Value/Total capital or $£100/£150 = 66.66\%$ rate of profit. As the amount of constant capital is increased, so the rate of profit falls. In the same example given the same rate of surplus value we increase the constant capital from £50 to £100. The rate of profit = Surplus value/Total capital = $£100/£200 = 50\%$. Again if we increase the constant capital to £200, all other things being equal, Surplus Value/Total Capital = $£100/£300 = 33.33\%$ rate of profit. And lastly constant capital is increased to £300, the rate of profit would be $£100/£400 = 25\%$.

This increase in constant capital expresses in Marxist terms a higher organic composition of capital, and is a progressive development of the productive forces. The tendency is therefore built into the very nature of the capitalist mode of production, and has been one of the major problems facing the capitalist class in the post-war period. The mass of surplus value increases, but in proportion to the increased size of constant capital it results in a falling rate of profit. The capitalists have continually attempted to overcome this contradiction by the increased exploitation of the working class, to increase the mass of surplus value and therefore the rate of profit, by means other than investment. They do this in a number of ways by raising the intensity of exploitation, increasing the speed of the machinery and the lengthening of the working day. Another method to restore the rate of profit is to cut the real wages of the workers below their real value. The very laws of capitalism gives rise to enormous contradictions. The capitalists' constant striving for profits gives the impetus for investment, but new technology forces

more workers on the scrap heap. Yet paradoxically the only source of profit is from the labour of the working class.

Export of capital

The highest stage of capitalism--imperialism--is marked by the enormous export of capital. In their search for increased rates of profit, the capitalists are forced to invest huge sums of money abroad in countries of low composition of capital. Eventually, the whole world, as Marx and Engels explain in the Communist Manifesto becomes dominated by the capitalist mode of production.

One of the major contradictions of capitalism is the obvious problem that the working class as consumers have to buy back what they have produced. But as they do not receive the full value of their labour, they have not the resources to do this. The capitalists solve this contradiction by taking the surplus and reinvesting it in developing the productive further. Also they seek to sell the remaining surplus on the world market in competition with the capitalists of all the other different countries. But there are also limits to this as all the capitalists of the world are playing the same game. In addition, the capitalists resort to credit, via the

banking system, to provide the necessary cash for the mass of the population to buy the goods. But this also has its limits as the credit eventually has to be paid back, with interest.

That explains why periodically, the booms are followed in regular succession by periods of slump. The feverish struggle for markets end up in a crisis of overproduction for capitalism. The destructiveness of the crisis, which are met with the wholesale writing-off of accumulated capital, are a sufficient indication of the impasse of capitalist society.

All the factors that led to the world upswing after the war have prepared the way for downswing and crisis. The characteristic of this new epoch is the organic crisis that capitalism now faces. At some stage the working class will be faced with a 1929-type slump if capitalism is not eradicated. Only by overthrowing the anarchy of capitalist production can humanity prevent the chaos, wastage and barbarism of capitalism. Only by eliminating private property of the means of production,

can society escape the laws of motion of capitalism and develop and blossom in a planned and rational way. The mighty forces of production, built by class society, can abolish once and for all the criminal scandal of so-called overproduction in a world of want and starvation. Eradicating the contradiction of the development of the productive forces and the nation state and private ownership, will provide the basis for an international plan of production.

Using the powers of science and technology, the whole of the planet could be transformed in the space of a decade. The socialist transformation of society remains the most urgent and burning task facing the world's working class. Marxism provides the weapon and understanding to weld together this mighty army for the establishment of a socialist Britain, a socialist Europe, and the basis for the World Federation of Socialist States.